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ABSTRACT

Adults learn from many sources, such as volunteer work, community services, homemaking, jobs, and other activities, and they increasingly want this learning to be recognized so that they can reenter the job market, get a promotion, or return to college. Therefore, scientific methods have been developed to help adults document their experiential learning. Among the main ways to assess prior experiential learning, the portfolio seems to be the most flexible and the most accurate. Other methods include testing, either by individual teachers or by standardized tests, and interviews. One of the basic principles of recognition of prior learning is to award credit only where credit is due in direct relation to education and/or working objectives. Recognition of prior learning has been successfully implemented in the United States, and the U.S. is now in the final stage of the overall process, which is the standardization of evaluation criteria. One principle must remain fixed: recognition must be given for learning outcomes in relation to goals by experts whose competence is evident using scientifically proven methods. (Examples of methods of recognizing prior learning in colleges in the U.S. are given in this paper.) (KC)

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ADULTS' PRIOR LEARNING

An Overview of Various Methods of Recognition

by

Marthe Sansregret

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ADULTS' PRIOR LEARNING

An Overview of Various Methods of Recognition

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INTRODUCTION

Today, the providers of education belong to various fields of competence, and adults learn from volunteer work, community services, homemaking, and many other forms of activities. These adults, due to changes in their interests and needs, seek a recognition for this prior learning, and then make a re-entry on the job market, get a promotion or return to college and university. Therefore, scientific methods have been developed to help adults make the proof of evidence of their competence. The recognition of Experiential Learning means: giving official credit for knowledge which has been acquired through means other than formal courses of study. The purpose of this paper is to present the main ways used to recognize adults' prior experience and will look at the general rules, the necessary conditions to fulfill this request and will give an overview of some successful experiences.

1. BRIEF HISTORY

After the Second World War, American soldiers requested that the skills they had learned during their military service and the courses they had followed to perform their various tasks be taken into account in order to avoid duplication of learning.

For the first time, the Armed Forces, the State, colleges and universities, community groups as well as business and industries got together in order to find possible ways to recognize the experiential learning of these people.

Later, the adult population in general i e. the people involved in paid work following numerous social changes, wanted to go back to school and obtain credits for what they already knew. A few years later, women involved in non-paid activities, such as homemaking, volunteer work, and community services, felt they should obtain official recognition for their contribution to the family and society.

If we consider these three types of moves in their request to support recognition of experiential learning, we can trace official recognition back to approximately 1945. But in the United States, it is mainly since the 70s that adults in general and later women in particular, can benefit of opportunities to seek a degree which will take into account what they already know.

The growing demand for the recognition of experiential learning is demonstrated by the opening of CAEL "The Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning" (1974) which recently changed its name to "The Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning". This center located in Columbia, Maryland, is the result of a research project undertaken by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) of Princeton, New Jersey. The financing of CAEL was first guaranteed by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, followed shortly after by the Ford Foundation, the Lilly Endownement and the Fund for the Improvement of Post-secondary Education.

Stanley (1980) mentions that in 1930, more than 300 institutions and hundreds of individuals, all members of CAEL, contributed through research toward the improvement of practices which lead to the accreditation of prior learning.

A growing interest in non-traditional education seems to be the turning point which has opened the academic world to this question of recognition of experiential learning. This particular kind of education gets its definition from "The Commission on Non-Traditional Study" (1973, p. XV) as an education which allows a diversity of learning opportunities offered to an individual, more than the uniform practices, which tend to diminish the importance of time, space and academic pre-requisites to the benefit of competence and performance.

2. DEFINITIONS OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Before elaborating on this topic, it is important to explain and give definitions of what we mean by Experiential Learning:

Experiential learning has been defined as "learning in which the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied. It is contrasted with learning in which the learner only reads about, hears about, talks about, or writes about these realities but never comes in contact with them as part of the learning process" (Keeton & Tate; 1978). Thus experiential learning usually occurs outside of the classroom although as Stanley (1980) has pointed out "the classroom also provides experiential settings." Regardless of where learning occurs, it is considered experiential if the person has learned by carrying out actions in a work, leisure or family setting; seeing the effects of those actions, arriving at an understanding of a general principle; and applying this principle in new circumstances (Coleman; 1976).

The two major forms of experiential learning are:

- Sponsored experiential learning such as field work and internships, which takes place away from the classroom but is planned and/or supervised by a faculty member; and,

- Prior experiential learning, which includes both intention learning, such as self-directed study or non-credit courses, and incidental learning, from paid or unpaid work as well as other life experiences (Ekstrom, 1983).

When adults enter or return to college, they often discover that they know some of the things that are relevant for their educational goals or that would enable them to meet institutional requirements. They may then seek recognition of their prior experience learning. Colleges and universities considering the recognition of experiential learning must decide on a rationale and a method.

3. RATIONALE FOR PROVIDING RECOGNITION OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

When talking about providing recognition of experiential learning, many people resent the idea, arguing that formal education is the only way to learn and also, that schools are now opened to all.

We can reply by saying that the educational process in its traditional way does not answer the needs of the veteran, the housewife who wishes to return to school after several years at home, or the small business owner who wishes to obtain a college degree on a part-time basis (Avakian; 1979). "Providing working people with lateral entry into a collegiate program on the basis of documented noncollegiate learning is an eminently sensible idea," argue Green and Sullivan (1975), "for requirements that result in duplication of learning are unwise use of both human and educational resources."

"What we need to argue," says Seeman (1983) "is that credit should be awarded not to certain experiences, but to the ability to process experience and transfer cognitive and affective perceptions". Stressing the difference between education and learning, he observes "There is a big difference between the student who just goes through an experience, and one who can look at it, process it, analyse it, put it into language and thereby 'own' it."

The increasing use and relevance of educational credentials in the work setting has brought about:

- the need to make the present system more comprehensive; and
- the desire of students to have their learning, whenever or however attained, incorporated into the credit and credentialing system in order to take advantage of subsequent educational opportunities without duplicating educational experiences and wasting personal resources (Miller and Mills; 1978).

The growing need for competence says Hatala (1979) obligates universities and colleges to revise their policies on learning acquired outside the institutions. Doing this, as Stanley (1980) has pointed out, would be an asset to these institutions since higher enrollment from an adult population would increase tuition income. In addition, as Sansregret (1983) notes, the idea of recognizing experiential learning translates into a concern for social justice and fairness to all.

Consequently, it has been argued (Davis and Knapp; 1978) that:

- College level learning should be recognized regardless of where it took place.
- Adults should not be required to take courses meant to bring about learning they have already acquired.
- Non-traditional educational options and programs serve the diverse needs of students.

4. GENERAL RULES EVALUATING AND ACCREDITING PRIOR EXPERIENCE

One of the basic principles that underlies the recognition of prior learning is to give credit where credit is due in relation with educational goals.

In other words, we could say that credit is not given according to a number of years of experience in a specific kind of work or in a community service or a leisure activity. Credit is given in relation to the learning outcomes from experience, rather than for the experience itself. Credit is given for verifiable learning (Empire State College; 1983).

Example: An adult who has done bookkeeping for approximately 10 years with chartered accountants, cannot claim 10 years of prior experience for repetitive and routine work. He would claim recognition of the skills he has learned to master over those ten years in relation with a business administration program, or of any other skills pertaining to related courses or programs.

Another principle supporting the recognition of experiential learning is the demonstration or the proof of evidence that one can present in order to receive official recognition of prior learning in relation with educational goals.

5. WAYS TO RECOGNIZE PRIOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

The assessment of prior experience learning may require techniques that are not used in assessing traditional learning as well as familiar methods. It is necessary to identify learning experiences, to map the breadth and depth of the learning that occured, to relate this learning to educational standards or occupational requirements, and to demonstrate the quality of this learning in relationship to these standards (Ekstrom; 1983).

- Tests, including both standardized tests specifically designed for the assessment of prior learning and faculty-made (nonstandardized) tests. Among the standardized tests we have the CLEP (College Level Examination Program) from ETS (Educational Testing Service) in Princeton, New Jersey.

- Credit by recommendation for courses offered by business, industry community groups and voluntary organizations. In order to maintain standards of quality toward credit recommendation, the American Council on Education has built up standards since 1945, to evaluate courses offered by the Armed Forces. In 1974, ACE has developed a program to extend the evaluation system to courses offered by civil organizations (ACE). Teams of specialists verify course contents offered informally as well as teachers' curriculum and competence, in order to make sure they meet the criteria corresponding to college-level programs. Every five years, ACE sends specialists to visit these groups who have previously been recognized to ensure that they still meet the established requirements.

- Individualized assessment, using portfolio assessment, interviews, demonstration or other techniques that enable an individual to show what he has learned and is able to do.

This method which helps adults make the proof of evidence of the prior experiential learning by themselves is also an excellent learning opportunity. By developing his portfolio, the adult makes an inventory of his knowledge and capacity, and can determine at the same time, the knowledge he lacks in order to pursue his goals. From both these evidence, he forms a real picture of himself and acquires more confidence in his abilities and in his projects.

The development of the Portfolio is done under the supervision of a counselor who is in general a professional in adult education. Rydell and Irwin (1982) maintain that students need support from the group. These authors observe that due to several steps in this process, candidates need assistance in order to identify, describe and transfer skills and knowledge

acquired outside the academic milieu. The development of the Portfolio also includes traditional learning that is officially recognized through transcripts and diplomas from colleges and universities (Sansregret; 1984).

According to Willingham (1977), the portfolio should be done to:

IDENTIFY	Identify college level learning acquired through life experience
ARTICULATE	Explain how and what parts of that learning are related to the degree objective.
DOCUMENT	Verify or provide evidence of learning.
MEASURE	Determine the extent and character of learning acquired.
EVALUATE	Decide whether the learning meets an acceptable standard and determine its credit equivalence.
TRANSCRIBE	Record the credit or recognition of the learning.

Looking at the three main ways to evaluate and credit prior experiential learning, it can be said that each method has its advantages and disadvantages. Tests which are the most widely used form of assessment of prior learning, seem best suited for assessing intentional learning, such as self-directed study. Standardized tests provide a means of comparing student. The credit recommendations provide a quick and easy way of recognizing the learning in non credit courses; however, in this case, the course is being evaluated rather than the learner. The portfolio method, which was developed for assessment of prior incidental learning, offers the greatest flexibility (Sansregret & Ekstrom; 1984).

6. SUCCESSFUL EXPERIENCES

Many successful experiences exist throughout the United States, in colleges as well as in universities, and a variety of material is becoming available to help these institutions assess prior experiential learning.

The New York Empire State College (1983) offers their adult clientele a possibility to design from their prior learning a program of studies in relation with their educational goals. Information sessions are offered to adults, to discuss future projects, and how they make the link between their formal learning and what they have learned outside the academic milieu. Identification and verification of prior college-level learning is made possible with the help of the faculty. By 1983, eight thousand (8,000) ESC students had completed their portfolios.

The Vermont State Colleges (1979) have developed a method to provide recognition of prior experiential learning that can be applied in any college throughout the State of Vermont. The adult students are invited to prepare a portfolio under the guidance of a counselor/instructor. This portfolio gathers the learning that has resulted from a student's experiences since high school, i.e. experience which occured other than under the supervision or sponsorship of a college or university.

"The Office of External Programs was authorized in November 1975 by the Vermont State Colleges' Board of Trustees to award college credit to adult learners who have demonstrated college-level competences." The Office of External Programs does not award degrees, but will award credit (Vermont State Colleges, Office of External Programs, Montpelier, Vermont).

An assessment course is offered in a particular semester but the Portfolio will not be assessed until the following semester.

At Thomas A. Edison College, in Trenton, New Jersey (1981), potential adult students with the help of an advisor, can also take advantage of the assessment methods to identify and tabulate the learning outcomes from prior experience. A Student Handbook has been prepared for this matter.

At the University of the State of New York (1983), the Regents External Degree Programs has prepared a series of self-assessment and self-planning exercices. Since 1971, this particular institution has helped more than 20,000 students to obtain a degree.

Elsewhere in the States, colleges and universities build and develop methods to assess adults' prior experiential learning. The Ohio State University, Kansas State University, and San Francisco State University are among other successful experiences to be mentioned.

An interesting fact is the development of specific material to assess women's experiential learning. Homemakers and women involved in non-paid activities such as volunteer work and community services, could not range in the usual scale of evaluation. Therefore, Ruth B. Ekstrom from ETS (Princeton, New Jersey) among other researchers (Dees, Steffen, Sansregret), has built models and tools to evaluate the skills acquired from that non-paid work. Projects HAVE Skills, ACCESS are some of those successful experiences that helped women return to school and/or reintegrate the labor force.

A large volume of literature is now available to people interested in implementing such programs. The CAEL (Columbia, Maryland) through its president Morris Keeton, seems to have become the "heart" of this new approach in adult education.

CONCLUSION

After World War II, the need expressed by the new veterans to have their skills recognized has brought together the different levels of authority throughout the United States, and they created various systems of recognition for prior experiential learning.

This new way of assessment has benefited adults in general, and later women in particular.

The recognition of prior experiential learning is for the "verifiable learning outcomes of experience" (V.C.S.; 1979) to recognize prior experience learning, avoid duplication of learning and help an adult obtain a

degree in less time and at a lower cost. It can also mean for the institution an increase in the student population.

Among the main ways to assess prior experiential learning, the Portfolio seems to be the most flexible and the most accurate method since it gathers all possibilities to prove the evidence that learning has taken place.

One of the basic principles of recognition of prior learning is to award credit only where credit is due in direct relation to education and/or working objectives.

This new approach in Adult Education has been successfully implemented troughout the United States, and the Americans are now in the final stage of the overall process which is the standardization of evaluation criteria.

Whichever way we look at the problem, one thing comes back every time: recognition must be given for learning outcomes in relation with goals by experts whose competence is evident using scientifically proven methods.

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